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SUBJECT: Southern Sudan: UNHCR Has Successes, Faces Challenges

¶1. The Director of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Southern Sudan, Bhairaja Panday, said that returns from Uganda, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) were now proceeding smoothly. However, he explained that returns from the Central African Republic (CAR) had been stopped due to the closure of the border, and many refugees awaiting return faced hardship and food shortages. Panday also feared that funding shortages would threaten UNHCR's long-term ability to effectively monitor and assist refugee returns. (Note: the UNHCR announced on July 10 that 10,000 Sudanese refugees had returned so far in 2006 from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, DRC, and CAR. End note.)

¶2. Panday told Embassy PolOff in a meeting on July 7 that he is very pleased that UNHCR has now facilitated 10,000 refugee returns. While he realized that this is a small portion of the nearly half-million refugees, he felt this start was promising, considering that the number stood in the hundreds at the beginning of the year. He said that refugee returns from Uganda, Kenya, and the DRC, all of which had signed tripartite agreements for returns this year, were now proceeding well.

¶3. Returns from the CAR remained a problem because the chartered repatriation flight has been grounded since the CAR closed the border in April 2006 over fears of Chadian rebel infiltrations. This left thousands of stranded refugees awaiting return, many of whom sold all their possessions and are facing food shortages because they did not plant crops in expectation of an imminent departure. Panday said that the government of the CAR has offered the option of an alternative charter company, but the asking price is multiples of current charter flights and well above UNHCR's budget.

¶4. Panday also complained that general budget shortfalls will soon begin to seriously impact UNHCR's ability to provide services. He said that he had just returned from a meeting in Nairobi where he was given a revised, and much reduced, budget. Because overhead costs and staff salaries are fixed, these line items consume a large percentage of the overall budget. This has led to staffing cuts and a consolidation of operations to Juba. The office in Malakal will be the first casualty. Panday is concerned that without staff in the field, the UNHCR's ability to accomplish its mission will be seriously compromised.

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